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Adventist Education in an Anti-Modern World: Challenge and Opportunity

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Abstract

Certain tenets of anti-modern thought clash with basic Christian assumptions. Consequently, Christians may not agree with the full scope of the anti-modern position – such as its relativism, fragmentation of knowledge, and rejection of religious doctrine. Such premises can ultimately lead to conclusions far removed from those of a Christian worldview. Nevertheless, while Christians cannot surrender the non-negotiable truths of their faith, they must seek to truly understand anti-modernism and its endeavor to address crucial issues in society.

Stirred by the anti-modern paradigm, for example, contemporary educators have raised valid concerns regarding educational practice – the role of community, the importance of personal experience and reflection, the need for authenticity, the value of emotion and creativity, the call for inclusion and the differentiation of instruction, and the education of the whole person. These matters, among others, can provide points of contact with the broad spectrum of anti-modern educators, presenting fresh opportunities for sharing deeper meanings and reorienting thought patterns toward Christian understandings.

In this article, we first examine the crumbling foundations of modernism (human autonomy, rationalism, scientism, technicism, and economism), and contrast these with the emerging tenets of anti-modernism (rejection of meta-narratives, affirmation of pluralism, contextualization, constructivism, and celebration of diversity).

We then engage in a biblical review of anti-modernism. The endeavor is not to endorse or reject anti-modernism as a whole, but to reflect on areas of opportunity and aspects of concern from the vantage of a Christian worldview. Aspects of this review include the following: rejection of meta-narratives and objective truth; pluralism and moral relativism; community, culture, and context; constructivism and authenticity; and diversity, creativity, and spirituality.

Finally, we explore a number implications for education. How do we, as educators, make use of the opportunities that anti-modernism offers us in education, while at the same time safeguarding the Christian worldview?

Keywords: Adventist education, Antimodernism, Authenticity, Biblical, Christian education, Community, Constructivism, Contextualization, Creativity, Critique, Culture, Diversity, Emotion, Ethics, Great Controversy theme, Meta-narratives, Modernism, Moral relativism, Pluralism, Postmodernism, Principle, Reason, Religion, Rule, Spirituality, Truth, Worldview

Adventist Education in an Anti-Modern World: Challenge and Opportunity

Ready or not, we find ourselves on a vast and relatively uncharted landscape, the anti-modern world. As the icons and trappings of modernity recede into the mists of history, we suddenly awaken to the fact that we now live in a different era – a world of globalization, extremism, and spiritual exploration; of global warming, shrinking resources, and virtual realities.

It is probably too late to be nostalgic for modernism or to take up a broadside position for or against anti-modernism. To do so would be erecting sandcastles to hold back the tide. One can no more escape the new world and its developments than one could turn back the clock and re-enter the 20th century. Rather, we must ask ourselves, “What now?” To understand where we find ourselves, however, we must recognize from where we have come and have a vision of where we are headed. We must also look beyond the tangibles, to the philosophic assumptions and core beliefs.

The Crumbling Foundations of Modernism

Conceived in the 15th century Renaissance and launched by the Enlightenment in the 17th and 18th centuries, secular modernism was built on a number of philosophical pillars. These include human autonomy, rationalism, scientism, technicism, and economism.

The premise of *human autonomy* maintains that mankind’s only constraints are the laws of nature and those it chooses to place upon itself. This conception of the autonomous man found expression in individualism and secular humanism. In essence, man became the measure and point of reference for all things, perhaps best expressed

Rationalism focuses on the quest for objective knowledge that unprejudiced knowledge is assembled as a building of foundations. Similarly, referentialism holds that truth is found in the world. Implicit in rationalism is the idea that reason is the only way to win out in the marketplace of ideas.

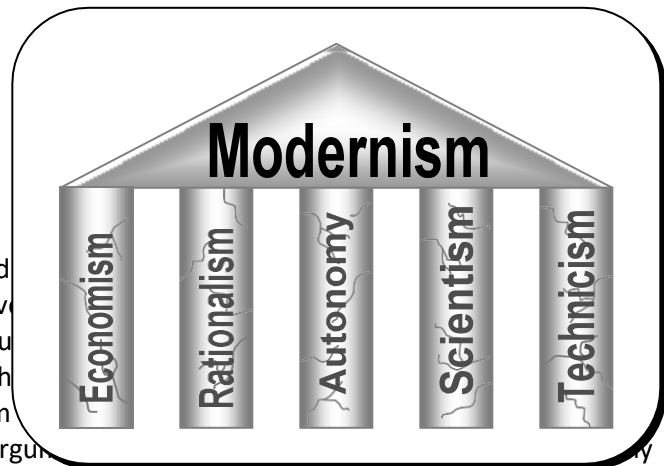
Scientism posits that human reason, particularly in the form of the scientific method, can provide exhaustive knowledge of the natural world and of human nature, given time. It proposes that all entities can be objectively identified in some manner and thus codified and ideally quantified. Naturalism, a key premise of the philosophy of science, finds its fullest development in the models of organic evolution.

Technicism highlights humanity’s power of mastery over nature, especially in the form of technology. Guided by scientific knowledge, technology is able to manipulate and control nature and ultimately organize society for security, peace, and happiness.

Economism maintains that humanity’s ability to maximize profit, wealth, and leisure provides the ultimate aim of science and technology. This belief has led to the popularity of socioeconomic models, such as capitalism and socialism, as well as the hedonistic and narcissistic tendencies of many modern societies.

The Emerging Tenets of Anti-Modernism

Since the mid-20th century, a remarkable paradigm shift has led to an increasingly pervasive worldview. For lack of a better term, and because the paradigm is still evolving, we will simply describe it as anti-modernism. By “anti-modernism,” we encompass both the early stages, which have frequently been identified as “postmodernism,” as well as more recent developments, which some have labeled “post-postmodernism.” In reality, however, the latter are but an extension of the fundamental reaction against modernism.



Antimodernism was anticipated in the works of Friedrich Nietzsche, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and Martin Heidegger, among others. Leading the way into postmodernist philosophical thought were individuals such as Jacques Derrida, Jean-François Lyotard, and Richard Rorty, as well as other philosophers, such as Michel Foucault, Hilary Putnam, Jürgen Habermas, and Willard Quine, who, by the way, did not necessarily see themselves as postmodernists. It was Lyotard, in his work *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (translated 1984), who first popularized the term “postmodernism” in the domain of social theory. By the turn of the century, however, there was an ongoing debate among self-labeled postmodernists as to what actually qualified as postmodernism and how a true postmodernist should approach life and inquiry (Canale, 2001; Grenz, 1996; Nicholson, 1990). There were progressive and conservative postmodernists (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1991), as well as postmodernists of “resistance” and those of “reaction” (Nicholson, 1990). Clearly, a gamut of postmodern views had emerged.

In the first decade of the new millennium, anti-modernism continued to evolve into what some analysts are calling “post-postmodernism” (PPM) or “ultra-postmodernism” (UPM). While retaining many features of postmodernism, this development has emphasized the unpredictability of history, the destruction of the self, the reconstruction of society, the valuation of performance over facts, a fascination with the mythical and mystical, and a particular antagonism toward Christianity (Baue, 2001; Eshelman, 2008; Iggers, 2009; Kaplan, 2001; Turner, 1996).

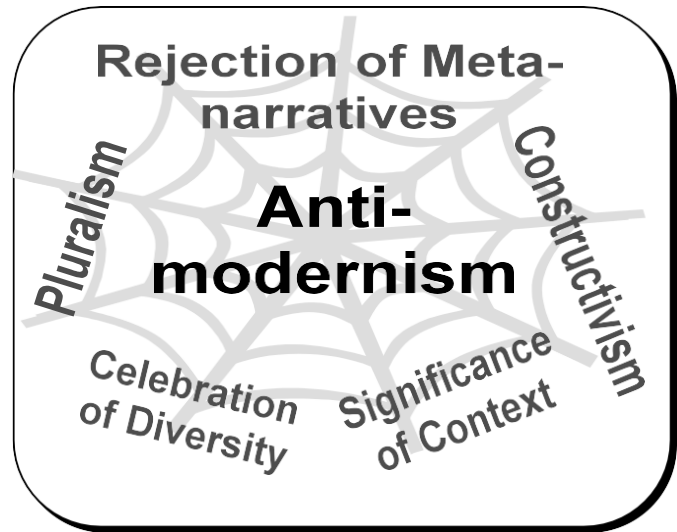
Antimodernism is, of course, not just a philosophical movement or an intellectual mood. It has branched out from the realm of academia to find cultural expression in architecture, art, theatre, film, and literature, where it embodies such attributes as the challenging of convention, the mixing of styles, emphasis on diversity, tolerance of ambiguity, a celebration of innovation and change, and emphasis on the constructedness of reality (Beck, 1993; Hutcheon, 1989). Stanley Grenz (1996), for example, notes that the shift from the popular TV series “Star Trek” to “Star Trek: The Next Generation” was symptomatic of the shift from modernism to an anti-modern worldview. Similarly, works such as Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series and Cameron’s *Avatar* depict post-postmodernism’s increasing enchantment with the mythical and supernatural. This transcendence beyond mere philosophical debate has provided contemporary anti-modernism with poignant cultural intensity.

From a philosophical perspective, anti-modernism incorporates a variety of viewpoints, including theoretical approaches such as neopragmatism (e.g., Rorty, 1982), deconstruction (e.g., Derrida, 1976), and post structuralism (e.g., Butler, 2005; Foucault, 2001, 2002), as well as perspectivism, hermeneutics, and post analytic philosophy. Epistemologically, anti-modernism rejects “enlightenment rationality” – modernity’s quest for objective knowledge (Erickson, 2001; Murphy, 1996). Derrida’s project of deconstruction, for example, rejects logo centrism, the idea that meaning has a fixed reference point. Similarly, Quine rejected foundationalism’s picture of knowledge as a building resting on solid foundations, preferring the metaphor of a web or net. This concept of holism maintains that beliefs, rather than being grounded on firm premises, are supported by their links to adjacent beliefs and ultimately to the whole. Consequently, a modification to any element results in a ripple effect throughout the entire web, fulfilling the consistency requirement. Thus experience continually updates beliefs, forming the boundary conditions for knowledge. Consequently, holism’s hallmarks are corrigibility, an emphasis on process, and plurality.

Similarly, the concepts of the autonomous man, scientism, technicism, and economism began to fray. Instead of the social harmony and economic utopia promised by the Enlightenment philosophers such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and economists such as Karl Marx, society seemed to be spiraling into a dark abyss of terror and insanity. World Wars, revolutions and dictatorships, and the rise of extremism superimposed the constructs of power and culture on the autonomy of man. Science forged ahead at a formidable pace but brought with it mass slaughter on an unprecedented scale. Technology, seeking to improve living conditions, devastated the natural environment. Both socialist and capitalist political systems, designed to provide well-being for mankind, resulted in vast numbers of individuals, and even entire communities and nations, excluded from the economic benefits of mainstream society. Even mass education, which had promised opportunity and equality for all, did little more than reinforce social division and entrench conformity and exclusion.

Things simply were not working out as planned. Something, somewhere seemed to have gone very wrong. Consequently, a number of avant-garde thinkers began to doubt the validity of a unified rational explanation, or of a scientific or economic solution. The net result was a rejection of modernism and its premise that Reason could save us.

A number of anti-modern constructs have emerged to take the place of the deposed philosophical foundations of modernism. These include the rejection of meta-narratives; the affirmation of pluralism; contextualization and constructivism; and the celebration of diversity.



Renunciation of meta-narratives

In anti-modernism, there is skepticism of meta-narratives (Lyotard, 1984), overarching stories that seek to provide comprehensive explanations for reality. Sample “grand narratives” include the Christian perspective on the Great Controversy between good and evil; the secular explanation of human origins via evolutionary theory; the Enlightenment view that rational thought, linked to scientific and technological progress, will lead to social advance; and the Marxist account of social emancipation, driven by the revolution of the proletariat.

Anti-modernism rejects meta-narratives because they are seen to overextend themselves and attempt to explain too much. It also holds that meta-narratives promote exclusivity, which can lead to violence. It is, after all, belief in a meta-narrative that led to the horrors of the medieval Crusades and that fuels the terrifying extremism of al Qaeda.

In place of the meta-narratives of modernism, anti-modernism proposes a whole range of competing “small stories,” narrated by special interest groups (e.g., environmentalists, feminists, advocates of Intelligent Design, homosexuals, and a whole array of ethnic and religious communities). These separate and, at times, quite remote groups formulate collections of conflicting and, at times, mutually exclusive beliefs and goals, which are then paraphrased in terms of micro-narratives and political agendas.

With an embargo on all meta-narratives and the enlightenment quest for rational universal knowledge abandoned, Allen (1989) notes that there is an inevitable conclusion that every understanding of reality is but a function of history and culture. Consequently, reality is not only formulated differently in different eras and societies, but ultimately each individual must construct reality in his or her own unique way. The result of this demise of meta-narratives is pluralism.

Pluralism

Derrida (1976), a major voice of anti-modernism, postulates that there is no fixed metaphysical center (as in the case, for example, of realism or essentialism) but rather a form of non-locus in which, at any time, an infinite number of alternative loci come into play. This multi-centrism, coupled with Heidegger’s existentialism, yields pluralism.

In a pluralistic approach, for example, there is no central tradition of scholarship but rather multiple viable traditions. Eurocentric historical interpretations (with their white, middle-class, male bias) thus give way to a plurality of views – African, Islamic, feminist, and indigenous, among others.

Each of these perspectives should be considered as equal, with a scholar from any tradition expecting to learn from other interpretations as much as to contribute. “Uni-versities” should hence become “multiversities” – supporting multiple agendas and perspectives, rather than seeking to formulate a single “approved” interpretation of reality. There should be harmony and perhaps even dissonance, rather than voices merged in unison.

Significance of context

Contextualization resulted from an epistemological shift in anti-modernism. Based on the linguistic work of Ludwig Wittgenstein and J. L. Austin, a new perspective on language emerged. This posited a shift from “meaning as reference” to “meaning as use.” Rather than a statement having an objective meaning based on the declared definition of its words, the statement might have a variety of meanings, depending on the contexts in which it was used. Meaning in language thus became contextual, and understanding occurred only when context was taken into account.

Similarly, developments in quantum theory have bolstered the significance of context. Science found itself no longer able to support the Newtonian physics of particles as entities with fixed essences but rather as quantum entanglements in which an object can only be described in reference to other objects.

Culture is perhaps the best representation of the influence of context. In anti-modernism, the self is not autonomous but varies with the surrounding culture. In a sense, it is not we who think, speak, and act, but culture who expresses itself through us. Under anti-modernity’s contextual thesis, all human knowledge is mediated through the lens of culture and is thus contextual.

A corollary of contextualization is the role of community. Anti-modernity is post-individualistic. Relationships, in fact, become more important than knowledge, at least in terms of knowledge at the level of the individual. It is through relationships that we build the holistic web of experience and understanding. Thus anti-moderns have a strong need for community and building community becomes a prime goal.

Constructivism

In classical, pre-modern views (such as Idealism and many world religions), knowledge of truth and reality was received. In modernism, truth was discovered and reality confirmed through the scientific process. In anti-modernism, truth and reality are constructed (Hutcheon, 1989). In this anti-realist metaphysics, we do not encounter a world that is simply “out there,” but one that is dependent on our experience and thought, one that we actively construct by the concepts that we bring to it (Derrida, 1976).

This stance requires realignment in our conception of inquiry. No longer are we passive recipients or mere discoverers of preexisting knowledge. Rather, we are actively engaged in the interactive and iterative process of knowledge creation. In essence, truth is not found primarily in science, logic, or doctrine but in relationships and the telling of stories.

This construction of truth and reality leads to tentative and autobiographical knowledge. As individuals interact with their environment and with one another, and as they reflect upon these episodes, they begin to develop “working understandings” of life and reality. Intuition, feeling, and metaphor are key elements in this process. The result is a personal narrative, a description of view from one’s particular site in the world.

There are several implications of this constructivist view: (1) Qualitative, ethnographic, and narrative modes of inquiry are to be preferred over quantitative, analytic, or deductive modalities; (2) understanding is best communicated illustratively, rather than propositionally; and (3) expertise and “top-down” forms of interaction must be questioned. While some individuals clearly have understandings that others do not have, the latter may have insights that the former have not perceived. Thus, in place of expert to novice transmissions, exchange of knowledge is best seen as a dialogue, a conversation among individuals of difference in which there is mutual influence.

Celebration of Diversity

Antimodernism does not simply tolerate or affirm differences. It celebrates diversity. Foucault, in his classic work *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* (1961, 2001), argues that modernism and its attendant rationalism brutally excluded whole segments of society – the insane, the socially deviant, the challenged, the illiterate, even the devoutly religious – anyone who was viewed as “unreasonable.” To be truly human was to be rational, and those who were irrational were in some way subhuman (not so identified perhaps, for the sake of political correctness, but treated thus in the way they were marginalized). These had no societal value except as a warning to those tempted not to conform.

Society, in the anti-modern view, must not only accept but give voice to the downtrodden, the exploited, and the neglected. The community is inclusive and each member must be treated with respect and as of inherent value. The academy must be open to divergent views and the exploration of non-rational topics, including emotion and spirituality. Minority communities must be provided with latitude to seek out and sustain their particular conceptions. Individuals must be offered differentiated approaches and multiple pathways to reach personally relevant goals within the community.

A Christian Commentary on Anti-Modernism

Just as rationalism has been critiqued by anti-modernism, so anti-modernism must itself be thoughtfully reviewed. One must be careful, however, not to simply endorse or reject the aggregate package but to reflect on areas of opportunity and aspects of concern, particularly from the vantage of a Christian worldview.

Clearly, there are certain tenets of anti-modernism that are inimical with basic Christian assumptions. These include its strident skepticism, the abolition of meta-narratives, and the rejection of objective, universal truth. On the other hand, anti-modernism is also post-individualist, post-dualist, and post-rationalist (rejecting reason as supreme). How then does a Christian relate to a paradigm that brings welcome relief from many of the vexing problems of modernism, while at the same time undercutting core premises of the Christian worldview?

Early on, Beck (1993) had suggested that postmodernism might best be viewed as “a rich quarry in which we can go searching for gems of insight while not feeling obliged to take home all the rubble.” It is with this spirit of discernment and respect that we will seek to assess anti-modernism.

The Rejection of Metanarratives and Objective Truth

Understanding the great controversy between good and evil (Genesis 3; Revelation 12) is central to a Christian worldview. As a meta-narrative, it seeks to provide a coherent explanation of reality for all aspects of life. While anti-modernism may not subscribe to overarching explanations, the fact remains that meta-narratives, such as organic evolution and Islamic extremism, remain pervasive in contemporary society. In the anti-modernist view, a variety of alternative perspectives are needed – one of which can be the Christian worldview, with its inherent meta-narrative.

While the Christian meta-narrative centers on a cosmic conflict between good and evil, we must beware of searching for conspiracy and intrigue in every event and intent. Such suspicion can quickly degenerate into “witch hunts,” in which we imagine an extremist behind every beard, a communist under every placard. We must also beware of exclusivity, which can easily morph into religious intolerance and oppression. While Christians have truth, they do not, in the Christian worldview, have a monopoly on truth. Rather, because God causes the sun to shine on both the righteous and the unrighteous (Matthew 5:45) and would have all come to a knowledge of the truth (1 Timothy 2:4), non-believers also discover truth. Thus a Christian cannot be exclusive in the claim of truth.

There is a related aspect, however, which must be considered. Anti-modernism has announced the death of objective truth. For decentered anti-modernists, truth has become elusive, a personal commodity at best. They prefer to think of “many truths,” a “diversity of truths,” or “truth for me.” By contrast, the Christian worldview holds that God is trustworthy (1 Corinthians 1:9) and that His revelation of Truth is objective and reliable (John 17:17; 2 Peter 1:19).

Christians, however, must still interpret and apply truth to the contexts of their lives. In this process, it is indeed possible to arrive at false conclusions (2 Corinthians 4:4). Cross-checks with fellow searchers (Proverbs 11:14) and guidance from the Holy Spirit (John 16:13) are thus vital in arriving at correct understandings of truth.

Pluralism and moral relativism

Anti-modernism maintains that there is no center. Christianity holds that God is the core from which all things derive meaning (Acts 17:28). Anti-modernism asserts that all views be considered equal. Christianity affirms that God's perspective and His revelation of reality, truth, and value must supersede all others (1 Chronicles 29:11; John 3:31; Ephesians 1:21).

Anti-modernism further proposes that morality is relative, that each person weaves his own ethic from the web of his mind. Richard Rorty, for example, describes the moral self as "a network of beliefs, desires, and emotions with nothing behind it.... Constantly reweaving itself ... not by reference to general criteria ... but in the hit-or-miss way in which cells readjust themselves to meet the pressures of the environment" (1985, p. 217). This relativism finds common expression in phrases such as, "It may be wrong for you, but it's okay for me," or, "Who are we to judge others?" In contrast, Christianity observes that moral relativism results in ethical anarchy and societal decline. The cause of the corruption and senseless violence rampant in the historical period of the judges, for example, is highlighted in observation that "every man did what was right in his own eyes" (Judges 21:25).

How does a Christian relate to the pluralistic stance and attendant relativism of anti-modernism? First, we must recognize that pluralism, while freeing society from the tyranny of one voice – at least to a certain extent, has also resulted in the fragmentation of knowledge and the fracturing of values. Furthermore, we must beware that one runs the risk that pluralism may plunge into anarchism, rejecting any form of orderly schema. On the other hand, as we have noted, Christianity cannot be arrogant or elitist. We can learn from each other, perhaps especially from those who see things quite differently from the way we do. Each of us has limited perspectives and cultural "blindness." It is thus imperative that we hear and seek to understand the views of other religious and cultural traditions.

There is, however, an added dimension. While all human perspectives may, in a sense, be considered equal – each with significant insights as well as "blind spots," God has proactively shared His own divine perspective through His Word – and this revelation supersedes all others. Consequently, while we as Christians endeavor to understand viewpoints different from our own, we seek above all to see life from God's point of view (Matthew 6:33).

Another concept emerging from the discussion of relativism is an understanding of the difference between principles and rules. Principles convey universal values, such as respect, compassion, and integrity. Micah 6:8, for example, highlights several of these principled values – "He has showed you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?" (see also Philippians 4:8). Rules, by contrast, are explicit applications of underlying principles (which should always be the case!). As such, however, they are context bound. Respect, for example, may find varying expression in diverse cultures – such as whether one looks another in the eye or takes off one's shoes in a sacred place. The problem is that we sometimes impute the universality of moral principles to specific rules. This leap can cause us to fall into insensitive legalism.

Finally, we should perhaps note that absolute relativism is untenable – an inherent contradiction of terms. Furthermore, in praxis, individuals seem to need a certain degree of structure and continuity. Adolescents, for example, search for a sense of identity, stability, and belonging. Unfortunately, plurality and contingency have resulted in a world with few secure intellectual or psychological markers. In the Christian worldview, Jesus Christ can provide that universal rallying point, that secure frame of reference (Malachi 3:6; Hebrews 13:8). Precisely because we do live in a changing and fragmented world, we need sources of stability.

In the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7), Christ summed up His teaching with reference to a wise man and a foolish man (7:24-27). He noted that the difference between wisdom and folly was in the foundation – anchored in bedrock or situated in shifting sand. One might note that rock and sand are, in fact, similar elements. Sand, however, has been broken into fragments; rock is unified and intact.

Community, culture, and context

In the Christian perspective, community is essential (Psalm 133:1; Acts 2:1, 46; Romans 15:1; Galatians 6:2). Forging relationships and building community are necessary, both within the body of believers (1 Corinthians 12:12-27) and in fulfilling the gospel commission through outreach and friendship evangelism (Matthew 25:31-46; 28:18-20). Service to others is, in fact, a God-given responsibility (Acts 20:35; Galatians 5:13).

While community is vital, we stand, nonetheless, as individuals before God (Ezekiel 18:17-20; 2 Corinthians 5:10). We each have individual responsibilities, which we cannot simply leave for others in the community. In essence, while individuals may not be more important than the community, neither are they less so. We must not emphasize community to the neglect of those who make up the community.

Furthermore, the importance of relationship does not preclude the role of knowledge, as anti-modernism would have us to believe. Relationships are, in fact, often predicated upon knowledge. Trust, for example, is based upon evidence of trustworthiness (2 Timothy 1:12).

Anti-modernism also reminds us of the role of culture and that culture may vary from one community to another. In highlighting cultural differences, however, anti-modernists may have inadvertently minimized the importance of common ground. Even though certain aspects differ from culture to culture and among subcultures, we are more alike than we are different. We are a web of humanity, and there are values, such as life, well-being, and the pursuit of happiness, which are prized across cultures. Human societies thus have a certain degree of commonality and continuity. Anti-modernists correctly prompt us, however, that we must be careful of hasty generalizations. It is altogether too easy to create stereotypes and labels and deceive ourselves regarding the complexity and variety of human culture.

As a corollary of community and culture, anti-modernism emphasizes context. When interpreting biblical passages or historical events, it is indeed imperative that we consider context. The Jerusalem Council in apostolic times (Acts 15), for example, illustrates the importance of understanding culture and of taking context and background into account. On a personal level, the Christian also recognizes the influence of environment (Psalm 1:1; John 1:46). Man, however, is not simply a pawn of circumstance. While not autonomous, he does possess freewill. He has been granted the power of choice (Joshua 24:15; Proverbs 3:31; Isaiah 7:15-16), which rises above the grip of context.

Constructivism and Authenticity

In the anti-modern view, knowledge is a human construction. In the Christian perspective, God is the source of all knowledge (Proverbs 2:6; Daniel 1:17). There are multiple avenues, however, for attaining this knowledge. While knowledge may be *received* through divine revelation, other knowledge is *discovered* through scientific research, *confirmed* by logic, or *constructed* through experience and reflection (Job 29:16; Psalm 77:6; Ecclesiastes 1:13; Revelation 1:1). Similarly, Christianity proposes both external and internal dimensions of reality.

Anti-modernism, however, reminds us that we cannot be mere spectators in the process of knowing. Rather, we learn best when we are actively engaged in sense-making. The anti-modern view aptly emphasizes the importance of intuition, reflection, feelings, interactions, metaphors, and narratives. While not minimizing propositional expressions of knowledge (e.g., theory and doctrinal systems) – as anti-modernists tend to do—Christians can learn much from the anti-modern emphasis on illustrative presentations, storytelling, and autobiographical knowledge. A master communicator and teacher, Jesus Christ frequently utilized narratives (Matthew 13:34), and asked His hearers for the take from their “site” in the world (Matthew 16:13-17).

In the anti-modern view, all knowledge is tentative and there is a profound skepticism of expertise. The Christian, however, holds that universal Truth does exist (Psalm 100:5; Isaiah 43:9) and that God takes the initiative to communicate truth to humanity (Daniel 2:47). In a sense, though, Scripture resonates with the tentative nature of knowledge – “we see through a glass darkly” and “we know only in part” (1 Corinthians 13:12). Our understanding of truth is, in fact, a “work in progress” (Psalm 86:11; Ephesians 4:15; 3 John 4). Not even the greatest scientist or the most erudite theologian can thus claim to have arrived at a full understanding of truth or to have a definitive grasp on knowledge. Each of us has but a subset of the larger picture, with ample room for learning and growth.

Anti-modernism’s disbelief toward expertise then is a reminder not to blindly follow or too readily acquiesce to “authorities,” but as the first-century Bereans, to study things out for ourselves in order to ascertain “whether these things are so” (Acts 17:10-11). A Christian should continually ask questions and probe beneath the surface (Ecclesiastes 1:13; Isaiah 1:18; 1 Thessalonians 5:21). This view further suggests that it is a personal responsibility to share with others the insights of truth that we each have gained (Matthew 28:19-20), thus making interactions a time of mutual exchange.

Moreover, it behooves those who may have gained advanced training or experience in a particular field of knowledge to speak with humility, acknowledging that the frontiers of knowledge are also the horizons of one’s ignorance. This implies that while one may speak with measured confidence within his or her area of expertise, one should not presume to pontificate as an “authority” on all topics. Humility, honesty, and authenticity are Christian virtues (Isaiah 57:17; Matthew 18:1-4; James 4:10; 1 Peter 5:5), and should be widely promoted within the Christian community.

Diversity, Creativity, and Spirituality

Antimodernism celebrates diversity and promotes inclusiveness. It maintains that minority communities have rights and merit respect. It holds that each individual should be able to attain personally meaningful goals. It sustains that the community must function as a support network for the individual members of society.

These concepts find resonance within the Christian worldview. Christ’s mission was to break down barriers of exclusivity, to set the oppressed free (Isaiah 58:6; Luke 4:16-21). In His ministry, He reached out to the marginalized, to those rejected by mainstream society (Matthew 11:19; Mark 2:16). He is our example (1 Peter 2:21).

As Christians, we must become a voice for the exploited and oppressed. We must treat each person with respect, irrespective of ethnic, cultural, or religious affiliation. We must recognize that each individual, regardless of talent, ability, or social status, is of inherent worth, both by creation and by redemption (Isaiah 43:1; Jeremiah 1:5; John 3:16). We must treat others as we wish to be treated (Matthew 7:12).

How does diversity fit with the Christian view? Christianity’s focus is on unity (John 17:21), not uniformity. It centers on transformation, not conformity (Romans 12:2). It recognizes that God has “made of one blood all nations” (Acts 17:26), with all of their diversity. Paul’s description of the body and its various members (1 Corinthians 12:12-28) is, in fact, an apt metaphor for this concept of unity in diversity. Such a perspective suggests that while there are fundamental beliefs, the Christian paradigm must be open to consideration of multiple, divergent views. In these dialogues of faith, however, the Word of God serves as the ultimate criterion (Isaiah 8:20).

While recognizing specific groups (ethnic, religious, socio-economic, etc.) within the larger culture, we must be careful not to emphasize these categories to the neglect of individuals. It is possible, in fact, for two individuals from separate groups to share greater commonalities than two individuals from the same ethnicity, gender, religion, etc. Individuals are only in part identifiable in terms of the social categories to which they belong (Beck, 1993).

In the age of reason, modernists tended to suppress feelings. In rejecting rationalism, anti-modernism has chosen to highlight emotion – thus the emphasis on attitudes and self-esteem and the ubiquity of comments such as “How can it be wrong when it feels so right?” or “Just go with your gut feeling.” The result is the anti-modern tendency to elevate feelings above rationality and objective truth. In the Christian perspective, the emotions are of importance (Nehemiah 8:10; John 11:35). Too often, we have denigrated emotion into a sign of intellectual weakness and have reduced the gospel to a sterile set of postulates and proof texts. As Christians, we should affirm feeling as well as reason. The emotional and the rational must work together. We must make the gospel not only logically compelling, but also emotionally attractive – particularly in the anti-modern world.

Imagination, innovation, and creativity are hallmarks of anti-modernist thought. These spring from its emphasis on emotion, diversity, and the construction of knowledge. A focus on creativity is biblical. A Christian is to bring “out of his treasure things new and old” (Matthew 13:52). Such freshness of ideas implies creative thought.

An intriguing characteristic of creative thought is the tolerance of opposites, the embracing of polar truths. Here again, there is biblical precedent. Whereas Greek-based modern thought saw the opposite of a truth to be false, Judaic logic could see truth as the tension between contrasting ideas: “There is that maketh himself rich, yet hath nothing: there is that maketh himself poor, yet hath great riches” (Proverbs 13:7). “When I am weak, then am I strong” (2 Corinthians 12:10). “Whosoever of you will be the chiefest, shall be servant of all” (Mark 10:44). Thus Christ was not either human or divine, but both human and divine (Colossians 2:9; 1 Timothy 2:5); and we are saved entirely through faith (Ephesians 2:8), yet instructed to “work out our own salvation” (Philippians 2:12). Paulien (2004) notes that this rejection of the “either/or” categories of Greek philosophy may make it easier for anti-modernists to understand the Bible, compared with previous generations.

In the anti-modern world, there is a new openness to spiritual themes and dialogue. Spirituality is no longer banished to the fringes of society but has become a social commodity. This surge in spiritual consciousness, however, should not be confused with a renewed interest in religion. Anti-moderns are spiritual but not necessarily religious. Many, in fact, are suspicious or openly antagonistic toward religion, seeing institutionalized religiosity (i.e., traditional denominations, particularly those Christian) as exclusive and intolerant and especially any church that should see itself as unique – a “remnant, true church” (Paulien, 2004). To complicate matters, anti-modernists also view the Bible as oppressive – filled with violence, the subjection of women and minorities, and an ever-burning hell.

This perspective poses a monumental challenge to the Christian church. It suggests that Christians must be ambassadors of generosity, benevolence, and tolerance. It implies that witnessing may best be formulated as relational – developing conversations about God, sharing one’s personal experience with God, and seeking a deeper understanding of spirituality. Finally, Anti-moderns must see that Christianity is a vibrant community of faith, experiencing the joy and peace of a Spirit-filled life.

Some Educational Implications

In most Western societies, youth and young adults tend to be anti-modern. Driven by the media and various social ferments, anti-modernism has, in fact, permeated nearly every facet of youth culture. As educators, we cannot simply assume that our students come to us with the same paradigm in which we were formed. To be effective, we must understand what our students really believe. We must grasp the frame of reference that shapes their actions.

In reacting to anti-modernism, however, we must avoid merely taking a blanket position for or against the paradigm. This would be viewed as insensitive, dualistic, and devoid of reflection. Rather, we should candidly explore and assess the tenets and derivations of anti-modernism, identifying features congruent with a Christian perspective and pointing out areas of concern.

In this section, we will address the question: How do we, as educators, make use of the opportunities that anti-modernism offers us in education, while at the same time safeguarding the Christian worldview?

1. **The Great Controversy theme.** Given its coordinating role in the Christian worldview and the anti-modern antagonism toward meta-narratives, concerted effort must be made to help students understand the cosmic conflict between good and evil. While this can be introduced via a storytelling approach – which resonates with the anti-modern mindset—it is perhaps most important that students perceive how this controversy affects every aspect of life through multiple illustrations and candid conversations in each of the disciplines and subject areas.
2. **The shared nature of truth.** Anti-modernism rejects exclusivity. It should be clear to students that Christians do not have a monopoly on truth. Non-believers also discover truth. The key difference is that the Christian recognizes the Source of that truth. This implies that we can all learn from each other, regardless of belief or background, provided that we, as Christians, can connect that knowledge back to its Source and apply it to our lives through the “truth-filter” of His Word. It also suggests that the Bible might be first approached as a set of truth-stories, shared from diverse perspectives by people who encountered God in their lives.
3. **The vitality of objective truth.** Reports of the death of objective truth have been greatly exaggerated (respects to Mark Twain). Christian educators must affirm that God is trustworthy and that His revelation of Truth is reliable. Through the rubric of our lives, we are to model that God’s Word is relevant and far-reaching in its application. At the same time, we must be open and frank with students as to the fallibility of human interpretations of truth, emphasizing the triangulating role of the community of believers and of the Holy Spirit, as guide into all truth. We recognize that there is always a point which precedes reason, where one makes an assumption, a declaration of faith.
4. **The stability of the Christian ethic.** With the pervasiveness of moral relativism in contemporary culture, teachers can be quite certain that nearly every student entering the classroom believes that truth and values are relative. While circumstances do change and there is brokenness and fragmentation evident in many aspects of life, the Christian worldview is able to provide an ethical framework that offers stability and security. As educators, we must help students find foundations for their lives, enduring values and ideals which can provide a basis for living. We must help students understand that the solidity of truth and value contributes to a personal sense of identity, direction, and belonging. Together, we must extend a universal call for justice, sensitivity, and compassion.
5. **The principle/rule distinction.** While rejecting moral relativism, Christian educators should clarify the difference between principles (such as respect) and rules (how one should evidence respect in specific situations). Students should understand that while rules are limited in scope to particular circumstances and settings, principles incorporate universal values – relevant across time, place, and culture. Finally, teachers should ensure that any school-based rule is connected to underlying principles and should initiate conversations with students regarding the nature of these principles.
6. **The necessity of community.** Anti-modernism emphasizes community. While recognizing personal rights and individual accountability, Christian educators should seek to build community in the classroom and in the school, establishing positive relationships with and among students. Cooperation must replace rivalry; collaboration must supplant egocentric individualism. Unity and community must occupy the territory of both oppressive uniformity and unbridled individualism. Students should become socially conscious – dynamically involved in reaching out to the broader community, seeking to make a positive difference and to share the gospel of Jesus Christ.

7. **The transformation of culture.** Anti-moderns have highlighted the significance of culture. As educators, we must seek to understand our students' background and culture, which in turn modifies the way they see and understand life. At the same time, we recognize that culture is not omnipotent. As Christians, we should not mindlessly accept or reject contemporary culture but rather affirm those elements of culture that are in harmony with God's will and seek to redirect and elevate any aspect that may not be congruent with God's character or His plan. Students should see their role not merely as a thermometer, but as a thermostat of culture.
8. **The role of context.** When discussing social issues, historical events, and biblical passages with students, it is essential that we examine context. This anti-modern prompt helps us avoid imposing our own conditions on interpretations of meaning and motive. While recognizing the function of context, we as educators must also help students understand that, while both heredity and environment exert influence, God has also given us free will – the ability to make personal choices that may transcend the confines of both nature and nurture.
9. **The multiple avenues of learning.** As Christian educators, we believe that knowledge may be received from God, discovered throughout the natural world and human society, and formulated through personal experience and reflection. Consequently, we must ensure that students interact with each of these avenues of learning. The anti-modern emphasis on the construction of knowledge stimulates us to increasingly place our students in dynamic, sense-making roles, thus maximizing their active engagement. It aptly encourages us as teachers to frequently utilize metaphor, narrative, interaction, and reflection; and to combine qualitative and ethnographic modes of inquiry with quantitative, analytic, and deductive modalities. It prompts us to invite students to share the view from their particular site in the world.
10. **The dialogical nature of teaching and learning.** Anti-modernism sees education as a democratic process. Pedagogy is not simply the transmission of knowledge from expert to novice. It is more a conversation, in which both parties share experiences and insights. The teacher's role is consequently less of a top-down dispenser of information and more that of a guide by the side. We must increasingly think of teachers and students learning together and the building of a democratic, participative learning community as a key component of the search for truth. Appropriately, anti-modernism admonishes us not to blindly believe authorities – textbooks, experts, or even religious leaders, but to probe deeply, to question, and to seek the broader perspective. As educators, we must foster critical thinking and healthy skepticism.
11. **The authenticity of the teacher.** While the Christian worldview maintains that universal Truth does indeed exist, it also recognizes the human constraint of partial knowledge and the potential for flawed interpretation. Consequently, no one can claim infallibility or a full understanding of any topic – not even a teacher. As educators, we must model learning, authenticity, and humility. This includes recognizing the limits of one's knowledge, being honest about one's weaknesses, expressing the tentativeness of one's conclusions, and evidencing a zest for continued growth. It means that instead of trying to hide behind technical jargon in a pretense of knowing, one may simply state, "I don't know." Above all, we must reject the manipulative use of knowledge as power.
12. **The inclusion of diversity.** It is vital that students be taught not only to respect various ethnic and cultural groups but to affirm and to celebrate diversity. In so doing, however, we must focus not merely on differences but on the common features and values that we share across cultures in the brotherhood of mankind. We must find unity in diversity. This implies that, as educators, we must model and promote inclusiveness. Rather than advocate a "one-size-fits-all" approach, we should differentiate instruction, offering multiple pathways to personal goals. We must avoid stereotypes, intolerance, and any label that might be seen as demeaning or derogatory. Every human being – and that includes each of our students – must be treated with respect.

Together with our students, we must reach out to the marginalized and the oppressed. We must become a voice for the rejected and the exploited. We must make a positive difference.

13. **The balance of reason and emotion.** Modernism emphasized the rational at the expense of the affective. By contrast, anti-modernism promotes the emotive, while rejecting rationalism. Christian education must maintain the crucial balance between reason and emotion. As educators, we must help students think critically and analytically. We must also encourage sensitivity, expressivity, and passion. Students should see that the rational and the emotional each have limitations and work most effectively together, as crosschecks. A gut feeling, for example, should be weighed in terms of its consequences. Similarly, a logical course of action should incorporate benevolence and compassion. Anti-modernism's concern with the affective dimension of life also provides new opportunities to emphasize attitudes, values, and character formation within the education process. It helps us view students more holistically and not merely as an intellect.
14. **The emancipation of the creative spirit.** Christian education seeks to restore the image of God. A prime attribute of God is found in His work as Creator. Consequently, creativity must occupy a pivotal role within the educational process. As educators, we must foster imagination and innovation, curiosity and spontaneity. Creative expression and creative problem solving must be embedded throughout the curriculum. The educational program must provide multiple avenues for creative thought and expression, including a reallocation of educational time to the arts. Students should be encouraged to utilize metaphors and analogies, to be playful, to think divergently, to take mental risks, to explore new horizons, and to dream of unique scenarios and fresh possibilities. Teachers, in turn, must manifest a receptive, rather than critical attitude toward novel ideas. We must both stimulate and affirm creativity.
15. **The spiritual/religious bridge.** As Christian educators, we should make the most of the anti-modern interest in spirituality – the awakening to the metaphysical and transcendental. We should have conversations about God, sharing our personal experience with God and seeking a deeper understanding of the Spirit-filled life. We also need to recognize the reasons for anti-moderns' hesitancy regarding religion. In preparing the link between the spiritual and the religious, we must dispel misconceptions, respond to areas of concern, and candidly recognize where religion has fallen short. As the same time, we must present the Church as a community of faith, led by the Spirit, speaking out against injustice and oppression, and seeking to make a difference for God in the world. In our lives, we must model acceptance, generosity, and goodwill. We must evidence joy and peace. Perhaps most importantly, we should help our students understand that while Christianity must be personal, it should not be private. We have a mission of compassion, a message of hope.

Conclusion

As we have noted, there are certain tenets of anti-modern thought that clash with basic Christian assumptions. Consequently, as Christian educators, we may not agree with the full scope of the anti-modern position – such as its relativism, fragmentation of knowledge, and rejection of religious doctrine. Such premises can ultimately lead to conclusions far removed from those of a Christian worldview. While we cannot surrender the non-negotiable truths of our Christian faith, we must seek to truly understand anti-modernism and its endeavor to address crucial issues in society.

Stirred by the anti-modern paradigm, contemporary educators have indeed raised valid concerns regarding educational practice – the role of community, the importance of personal experience and reflection, the need for authenticity, the value of emotion and creativity, the call for inclusion and the differentiation of instruction, and the education of the whole person. These matters, among others, can provide points of contact with the broad spectrum of anti-modern educators, presenting fresh opportunities for sharing deeper meanings and reorienting thought patterns toward Christian understandings.

Such conversations respond to the Christian mandate given by Christ Himself when He declared, “You are my witnesses” (Acts 1:8). As Christian educators living in an anti-modern world, we must think systematically and deeply regarding our beliefs and convictions. We must be able to speak clearly, coherently, and persuasively regarding our educational perspective and Christian worldview (1 Peter 3:5). Ultimately, we must share a Hope for the future.

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